Class instructs border inspectors on weapons detection

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RICHLAND, Wash. — A radiation pager beeps wildly as a customs agent searches a suspicious stack of fertilizer bags, uncovering concealed sticks of dynamite. Up the sagebrush-lined road, border inspectors reveal a hidden compartment in a sealed oil drum using an ultrasound device.

This remote stop in south-central Washington is no random customs check — it's the latest in high-tech training to detect and identify weapons of mass destruction.

Offered by the Department of Energy's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, the class is designed to supplement training for Coast Guard, Border Patrol, customs and agriculture inspectors.

The three-day course includes classroom instruction and field training on everything from recognizing missile systems to learning how biological agents can be spread.

More than 400 inspectors have completed the monthly class. It was so successful in its first year, funding was increased to offer it twice a month beginning in this fall.

"It's excellent training. It complements what we do with our national training in Georgia and our training in the field," said Todd Hoffman, director of interdiction security for technology for the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, which is under the Department of Homeland Security.

Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, a Department of Energy science research facility with an annual budget of nearly $600 million, is located near the Hanford nuclear reservation, site of the top-secret Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb during World War II.

The close proximity offers a unique opportunity for students to learn firsthand how to differentiate weapons-grade plutonium and uranium from medical isotopes.

"There's a unique opportunity here," Hoffman said. "There's nowhere else in the field where we can use natural sources."

The lab first began offering the program internationally in 1997. Over the next several years, more than 300 border agents from central and eastern European countries and the former Soviet Union were taught to thwart potential weapons smuggling following the demise of communism there.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the class was extended to customs and border agents in the United States to supplement their regular training.

"It is new to them. The anti-terrorism focus was just laid on them after 9-11," said Bill Cliff, the lab's program manager. "The question is, how do you train them to be able to recognize these things while still going about their jobs?"

The answer, it seems, is to test them in their own environment: a mock "port of entry" where instructors plant dangers the students must uncover in a real-life simulation of a border check.

At one station, an ultrasound device resembling a hairdryer identifies the liquid contents of tanks and drums and locates hidden compartments.

Radiation pagers and gamma spectrometers detect concealed radioactive materials aboard a tractor-trailer. A ruse often steers them away from their true target: a sarin-filled wine bottle atop a concealed bomb.

A hooded polyethylene suit for handling biological agents left the students puzzled when they uncovered it, but should have been the clue the sarin was on board, said Richard Arthur, a 20-year lab scientist.

"Only one person in two years has discovered the sarin, which has a different viscosity than wine," Arthur said. "We'll explain to them their instincts are right — we can give them all the tools in the world, but we can't teach them instincts."

The bureau picks the roughly 25 students from seaports, airports and border stops nationwide for each class. The lab also hires retired customs agents to assist with the training, and the students don't hesitate to pepper them with "what if" questions.

John Barnes, a 16-year customs inspector stationed in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., called the class the best training he has received in his career.

"These folks, many of them are nuclear experts," said Barnes, 39. "Interacting with these scientists gives us a chance to learn from their expertise and knowledge on high-tech articles.

"We're not unfamiliar with a lot of the technology. This just gives us practical experience," he said.

Border and customs inspectors already have been trained on the equipment they use in the class, but practice always helps, Hoffman said.

"This training is part of a larger holistic approach. Since 9-11, our whole focus is on anti-terrorism. We still focus on narcotics, but without question, our main focus is now preventing terrorism," he said.

Being "pseudoscientists" also helps to put the inspectors at ease, Hoffman said — at a time when they're facing increasing pressure.

"We all want to think we're infallible and we do our jobs the best we can," Barnes said. "We're always concerned we're going to miss something. But I can't help but think we will be well prepared after this."